

## The Scheming Plans of Mice and Men

The world is a food chain. All animals struggle for life, from the tiniest gnat to the leviathan under the sea, and are weak to some and dominating over others; such is the law of the jungle. It is not just beasts that adhere to the law of the jungle, but humankind too is bound by this ancient code. No place is more apparent to obeying the law of the jungle than a lonely ranch, bordered by weeds and solitude. Every main character is in one way a helpless mouse to some and a powerful figure to others, possessing many unique strengths and weaknesses; yet all of the characters on the ranch are ultimately all under a blight from loneliness. All of the main characters in *Of Mice and Men* partake in this war betwixt souls; however, two characters, Lennie and Curley's wife, will be discussed as representative samples.

Lennie presents a clear example of being a mouse to some and man to others. Throughout the novel Lennie's source of power is his strength. Starting from the beginning Steinbeck induces images of Lennie as a strong animal. On as early as page two Lennie is a "huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, and wide, sloping shoulders; and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws." George describes Lennie as "Strong as a bull" (Steinbeck 11). The workers show acknowledgement of Lennie's strength during work. During the 1992 movie men are reluctant to work in partnership with Lennie due to the sheer difficulty of keeping up with Lennie's hay bale lifting speed.

While Lennie's strength shows him as a man of power, the kink in his armor is his mental capacity. From Lennie's first moment of dipping his head in non-fresh water it is clear he is not very intelligent. Lennie is subservient to George. Upon retrieving a mouse Lennie is ordered to give it to George, and Lennie is compared to a terrier dog giving a ball

to George's imperious hand. People other than George exploit Lennie's inferior mental state. Crooks, who is ordinarily at the bottom of the 1930s social totem pole, irritates Lennie by supposing George doesn't come back for Lennie. Crooks is able to keep Lennie in a position of anguish until Lennie seriously thinks someone may have hurt George, and seems prepared to use his strength of bullish muscle. Lennie's obtuse logic is ultimately what spells his doom; his tendency to grasp or hit things upon screaming or biting leads him to accidentally kill Curley's wife. In the end of the movie a revolver, a symbol of authority and the law, kills Lennie, leaving him and his friend George alone.

Curley's wife, though without a name, portrays a deep strong and eventually weak side. Throughout the book she is a strong and defiant character. She has "the eye" for men other than her husband Curley, despite his wishes (14). To defy a husband's wishes in the 1930s was unheard of, and Curley's wife doing so implies great courage. Curley's wife for most of the novel seems to have her husband's temper as an advantage; other men are limited in their ability to insult her in her face for her flirtatious actions or respond in kind, lest they anger her impetuous husband. She also has her sex as a woman to use to her advantage: when Crooks asks her to leave his barn room she reminds him that she could immediately get him lynched by crying rape (39). After being reminded of how easily he could be killed, Crooks "Seemed to grow smaller, and he pressed himself against the wall" (39). Crooks seeming smaller and pressing himself against the walls are characteristics that fit a mouse, showing the power differential between Crooks and Curley's wife.

While Curley's wife appears puissant and lustful for most of the story, she, like all other main characters, has a flaw: loneliness. Shortly before her death she reveals to Lennie her loneliness; "...Why can't I talk to you? I never get to talk to nobody. I get awful lonely" (43). While Steinbeck's book only reveals her inner loneliness near the end of her life, the 1992 movie reveals the loneliness of Curley's wife throughout the video; she is continually lonely and desperately seeking attention but none of the men will socialize with her due to her aggressive husband Curley. Her desperation for someone to talk to is ultimately what got her killed, due to her allowing Lennie to pet her hair.

Curley's wife, Lennie, and all other characters share in their weakness of loneliness.

The common weakness that links all of the characters is loneliness, which pervades as a theme throughout the story. Steinbeck has all main characters except Curley (George, Lennie, Curley's wife, Crooks, Slim, and Candy) directly show or mention loneliness on at least one occasion in both the book and movie. George and Lennie mention their uniqueness due to their being together at the opening and ending scene of the novel. Curley's wife confides her loneliness to Lennie shortly before her death. Crooks tells Lennie that "A guy needs somebody" (Steinbeck 36). Slim mentioned to George that "Ain't many guys travel around together," (17). Lastly Candy values a physically useless dog for its companionship. What is more impressive, however, are the numerous hints at loneliness and solitude. Steinbeck plants many subtle queues of loneliness; the queues are so subtle that they almost seem to be in the "unconscious" of Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Only upon detailed evaluation could I find several of them, though possibly not all. Examples of these cues are the ranch being near Soledad (solitude in Spanish) and Weed (weeds are associated with vacant fields), George continually plays the card game Solitaire, and Candy has only one arm. Loneliness is even implied in the non-major characters who spend their \$50 monthly earnings at prostitution houses where they can have the attention of women. Steinbeck, through these direct and subtle messages, shows that the blight of loneliness affects all of the characters.

While Lennie and Curley's wife are but a representative sample of the characters, they all have various strengths, from Lennie's strength to the defiance of Curley's wife. While the characters also have major weaknesses, they all share in their loneliness. Steinbeck has characters directly convey loneliness, and indirectly symbolizes it. Throughout the novel characters vie with each other for dominance; this is the world *Of Mice and Men*.

## Work Cited

Steinbeck, John. *Of Mice and Men*. Oswego City School District. n.d.. Web. 15 September 2014.